

Vermont's Education Commission Faces Challenges in Shaping the Future



S
H
A
R
E

(Source-vtdigger.org)

Analyzing the Past to Guide the Future

The newly established Commission on the Future of Public Vermont's education is tasked with a critical responsibility: to evaluate and reshape the state's education system. The commission aims to create a system that is equitable, high-achieving, and affordable. However, this undertaking comes with the challenge of examining the impacts of previous education legislation, particularly Act 46. This law, enacted nearly a decade ago, aimed to merge school districts to provide consistent opportunities for students and achieve economic efficiency. While the act was

expected to improve education outcomes, its legacy remains contentious, with ongoing debates about its success and impact on local control of public education.

Some critics argue that [Vermont's education](#) has failed to thoroughly assess the consequences of Act 46, particularly about small school closures and district mergers. One of these critics is Margaret MacLean, a former teacher and principal, who has called for a more comprehensive evaluation of the act. MacLean believes that the lack of an independent study has left the state without a clear understanding of what has and hasn't worked under Act 46. Her concerns echo across the state as discussions about closing small schools to save money resurface.

Delayed Reports and the Need for Comprehensive Analysis

One of the key issues surrounding Act 46 is the delay in reporting its progress. The Vermont Agency of Education was required to submit annual reports until 2021, but the final two reports were delayed. This week, the 2020 report finally surfaced, four years late, while the 2021 report remains pending. The belated release of the 2020 report, which focuses on seven unified districts, has been criticized for its limited scope and reliance on anecdotal evidence rather than comprehensive data. MacLean, along with others, has called for an independent analysis of Act 46 to ensure that future decisions are based on factual information.

Interim Education Secretary Zoie Saunders has taken steps to address the gaps in data. She released a wide-ranging report analyzing the state's public education system, highlighting demographics, student achievement, and the economic implications of school district sizes. The report found that smaller districts are spending more per student while paying teachers less. However, the lack of a uniform metric to evaluate the cost savings of merging districts has made it difficult to fully assess the financial impact of Act 46.

Challenges Ahead for Vermont's Education System

As the Commission on the [Future of Public Education](#) prepares to deliver its short-term recommendations by December 2023 and final recommendations by December 2025, it faces significant challenges. Critics like John Castle, a member of the public education commission, believe that understanding Act 46 is crucial to shaping the future. Castle, who was once a vocal opponent of the act, has pointed to data that suggests voters in unified districts struggle with larger, merged district budgets. This has led to lower approval rates for school budgets compared to independent districts.

Despite the delayed reports and ongoing debates, the agency's recent data report offers a snapshot of Vermont's education public education system. The state's K-12 enrollment has dropped by 14.2% over the past two decades, and academic achievement has also declined, though there are signs of improvement. Vermont continues to have one of the lowest student-to-teacher ratios in the country, while its spending per pupil ranks among the highest.

The commission's task is daunting, as it must navigate the complexities of Vermont's education system while addressing the long-standing issues brought to light by Act 46. By learning from the past, the commission hopes to guide Vermont toward a future that prioritizes high-quality education for all students.

